SHAPES OF CLAY

APRIL
1925

GLADDING, McBEAN & CO.

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VOLUME I

NUMBER I

APRIL · 1925

"Grey Against the Blue of the Sky"

IT is a far cry across the centuries from the wall of Babylon to the Standard Oil Building in San Francisco, yet a chance remark of Vitruvius in his classic work on Architecture suggests a connection. "There is," says the old Roman, "a vast lake at Babylon, called the Asphaltic Pool. It contains floating bitumen, with which, and with bricks of baked earth, Semiramis built the wall round Babylon." The Assyrian queen, it is plain, built with Mesopotamian oil. The directors of Standard Oil, in building the loftiest structure thus far completed in San Francisco, were indebted to California petroleum. That Babylonian wall of baked brick was faced, on its inner enclosure, with enameled tile. The great Standard Oil Building in San Francisco is clothed in terra-cotta. Does it seem far-fetched thus to join a marvel of remote antiquity with a sky-scraper on San Francisco Bay? Not so. There is, in architecture, a unity that binds the bygone ages with the present, and to the thoughtful observer every important structure tells stories not only of the time that witnessed its building, but of all the past.

The noble structure erected by the Standard Oil Company (California) on the southwest corner of Sansome and Bush streets, San Francisco, rises from the curb to the top of the flagpole 363 feet 3 inches, lifting its brow above all the sky-scrapers that preceded it, and achieving with easy grace the domination of a truly beautiful skyline.

Standard Oil had outgrown its former building. During the War period there had been unprecedented growth, and this had continued afterwards, steadily and vigorously. More ample room was immediately imperative, and the ascending curve of future growth could not be disregarded.

Given an available lot in the heart of the financial district, with a frontage of 206 feet on Bush Street and 137 feet 6 inches on Sansome, the problem submitted to George W. Kelham had several fixed factors. There was the calculated future growth of a tremendous business; the necessity of grouping departments, one with another, in relations of propriety and convenience; the demand for the maximum of natural lighting; the vexatious matter of continually increasing congestion on two busy streets, both carrying trolley lines, both cluttered with parked and moving automobiles.

In its essentials it is the problem of every American architect who designs a sky-scraper for commercial use. It is solved every day, of course, but it is solved with outstanding success only when the architect, threading its mazes with assured step, keeps uncompromisingly in view his creative vision of beauty. Mr. Kelham had, for special stimulus, the authority and dignity inherent in an institution of worldwide scope.

The solution gave a Class-A structure twenty-two stories high, resting on a continuous mat of reinforced concrete laid to a thickness of 7 feet 6 inches, a kind of foundation never before constructed on the Pacific Coast. A typical office floor covers an area of 17,300 square feet. For the maximum of working space and light, an L-shape was indicated. The basement was planned as a garage for company cars, an unusual feature of present convenience that anticipates an inevitable condition of the future when down-town traffic regulation will prohibit the parking of motor-cars. With the basement laid out as a garage, it was needful to provide otherwise for the ordinary storage space required in so large a building. The nineteenth floor was planned for this purpose, and this decision inspired a decorative exterior treatment at that level which is one of the most admired features.

Despite its huge mass, the building has a delicate beauty. It does not climb ponderously; it springs to its great height. Styled after the Italian Renaissance, it rises three stories in gray California granite, and for the rest

of its lofty stature in terra-cotta. Topping the eighteenth story is a massive intermediate cornice of terra-cotta with rich Florentine brackets of the same material. Above this cornice rise three stories more. The roof of Cordova tile has a gentle pitch.

The three topmost stories are set back, not only from the intermediate cornice, but from the building-line of the stories below. This is an arresting feature of the design, and helps to invest the building with its distinctive monumental character. Concerning this feature George W. Kelham says:

"It is what we are coming to in sky-scraper architecture. The zoning laws of New York now require that a building go back in proportion as it goes up. Instead of hampering architects in designing high buildings, these laws have given them their great opportunity. Most commercial structures go up in a hard, straight line, with a projecting cornice at the top. The illusion is of a building leaning out at the top. We have no law on the subject in San Francisco, but perhaps this building will suggest to future owners that it should be done this way from choice."

The Standard Oil Building has frontage on two comparatively narrow streets. From the viewpoint of the spectator, the L-shaped court is the most important elevation because more readily and more generally seen. Market Street, cutting diagonally through the heart of San Francisco, affords superb views of this court, and so do several of the city's hills.

There was plenty of San Francisco precedent for a slighting treatment of this court exterior. And plenty of Italian Renaissance precedent too. "All the palaces on the Grand Canal," says R. Phené Spiers, writing of the Cinquecento in Venice, "have an architectural frontage only, the flanks being built in plain masonry or brick stuccoed over, and with very poor, if any, dressings to the windows. This is well exemplified in the Vendramini palace, where there are gardens on each side, showing the total want of correlation between the rich architectural front and the poverty of the flanks."

These bad precedents were thrust aside by the directors of Standard Oil and their architect. The wall treatment of the frontages, with its beautiful decorative details, was carried out all the way round the building. The court is as finished as the façades. There is no poverty in back to mock the richness in front. The only difference is that the court is faced with brick,

I · Standard Oil Building, San Francisco — George W. Kelham, Architect

Viewed from the eucalyptus slope of Telegraph Hill, the Standard Oil Building presents an arresting façade of gray terra-cotta that adds a new meaning to the poet's description of San Francisco as the "cool gray city of love."

II · Standard Oil Building, San Francisco — George W. Kelham, Architect

After a year of experiment the ceramic chemists of Gladding, McBean & Co. produced a terra-cotta called "Granitex," harmonious in color and texture with the gray California granite selected for the first three stories.

possessing the same color value as the terra-cotta, with some terra-cotta interjected to carry out the horizontal lines of the design. The building is therefore monumental in the strict sense of the word. Not only in design, but in finish and decoration, it is a harmonious whole; its beauty is unified.

When a light color was chosen as most appropriate for a monumental building, and California granite designated for the base, terra-cotta was selected for the chief façades. The plasticity of terra-cotta fitted the scheme of decoration, while the delicate color-receptivity and range of texture were relied upon to match the tone of the gray California granite.

But how to get a granite-like terra-cotta? There had been no attempt on the Pacific Coast to develop such a material; a new problem had to be solved. This problem was submitted to Gladding, McBean & Co. Fortunately there was ample time for study. The ceramic chemists at Lincoln, California, spent a year in experimentation. In the course of the work sample after sample was produced only to be discarded. But each experiment brought the ceramic chemists closer to the solution, and finally they produced a terra-cotta which, when built up upon a granite base, in actual size, satisfied the most exacting eye. The quest for propriety of color and texture, intensively pursued for a year in laboratory and kiln, was crowned with success. During the same period, the chemists at Lincoln solved the problem of producing a granite-like brick for the facing of the court.

The new terra-cotta (as well as the new brick) was named "Granitex." It represents a distinct advance in terra-cotta practice, and so admirably has it served the architect's requirement of monumental solidity combined with plastic delicacy, that the Standard Oil Building has become at once an inspiration and a precedent.

It rises up from the ground, grey from the
paving of the street . . grey against the blue of the . . sky. . . So
grey under the fading . . sun, grey with the wind-storms, grey with the rain-storms, grey with
the beat of many days' sun, from sunrise to sunset; showing white sometimes, too,
when the sun strikes it strongly; snowy-white, sometimes, when the moon
is on it, and the shadows growing blacker; but grey now,
fretted into deeper grey.—WILLIAM MORRIS.

SHAPES OF CLAY

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Edward F. O'Day, Editor

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The open magnificence of antiquity ran much in the artifice of clay. Hereof the house of Mausolus was built, thus old Jupiter stood in the Capitol, and the *statua* of Hercules, made in the reign of Tarquinius Priscus, was extant in Pliny's days.

THIS testimony to the lasting quality of terra-cotta was offered some two hundred and fifty years ago by the delightful Sir Thomas Browne in his essay on *Urn Burial*. That terra-cotta statue of Hercules had a life of seven hundred years. It survived the dynasty of Roman kings, outlived the Republic, and saw the Empire firmly established. That Capitoline Jupiter lasted as long a span.

These statues were wrought by Etruscan artists. The highly civilized Etruscans who taught young Rome the arts of architecture and sculpture were very partial to terra-cotta, as we have known ever since the cities and cemeteries of Etruria began yielding their treasures.

In the British Museum and other European galleries there are many Etruscan terra-cottas in a truly amazing condition of preservation. The beautiful Castellani sarcophagus of Etruscan terra-cotta dates from the end of the sixth century B.C. The longest Etruscan inscription ever found is a *stele* of terra-cotta preserved in the Royal Museum of Berlin. It belongs to the fifth century B.C., and after the wear and tear of twenty-three hundred years, two hundred continuous words of its mysterious text can be read quite easily.

The antique world of the Mediterranean was rich in terra-cotta monuments. Mere age could neither wither nor weather them. Many fell before the onrush of barbarian hordes armed with torch and ballista, and those that escaped are constantly emerging from their hiding-places, with strength and beauty still upon them. Witness the temple at Thermon in Acarnania, constructed of wood and terra-cotta (in the very oldest way of Greek temple-building), with painted terra-cotta slabs in wooden frames for metopes. It dates from the sixth century B.C. Far more ancient is the Temple of Hera at Olympia, which affords the oldest known example of a terra-cotta roof. Its date — think of it! — 1000 B.C.

Thus terra-cotta that antedates recorded history has survived to show us how substantially and beautifully the Greeks built long before Homer sang. Small wonder that Ruskin calls it "a material which excels every other in permanence."

* * *

This is the first issue of a periodical devoted to terra-cotta, face brick, roof tile, faience tile, and kindred shapes of clay.

III · Standard Oil Building, San Francisco — George W. Kelham, Architect

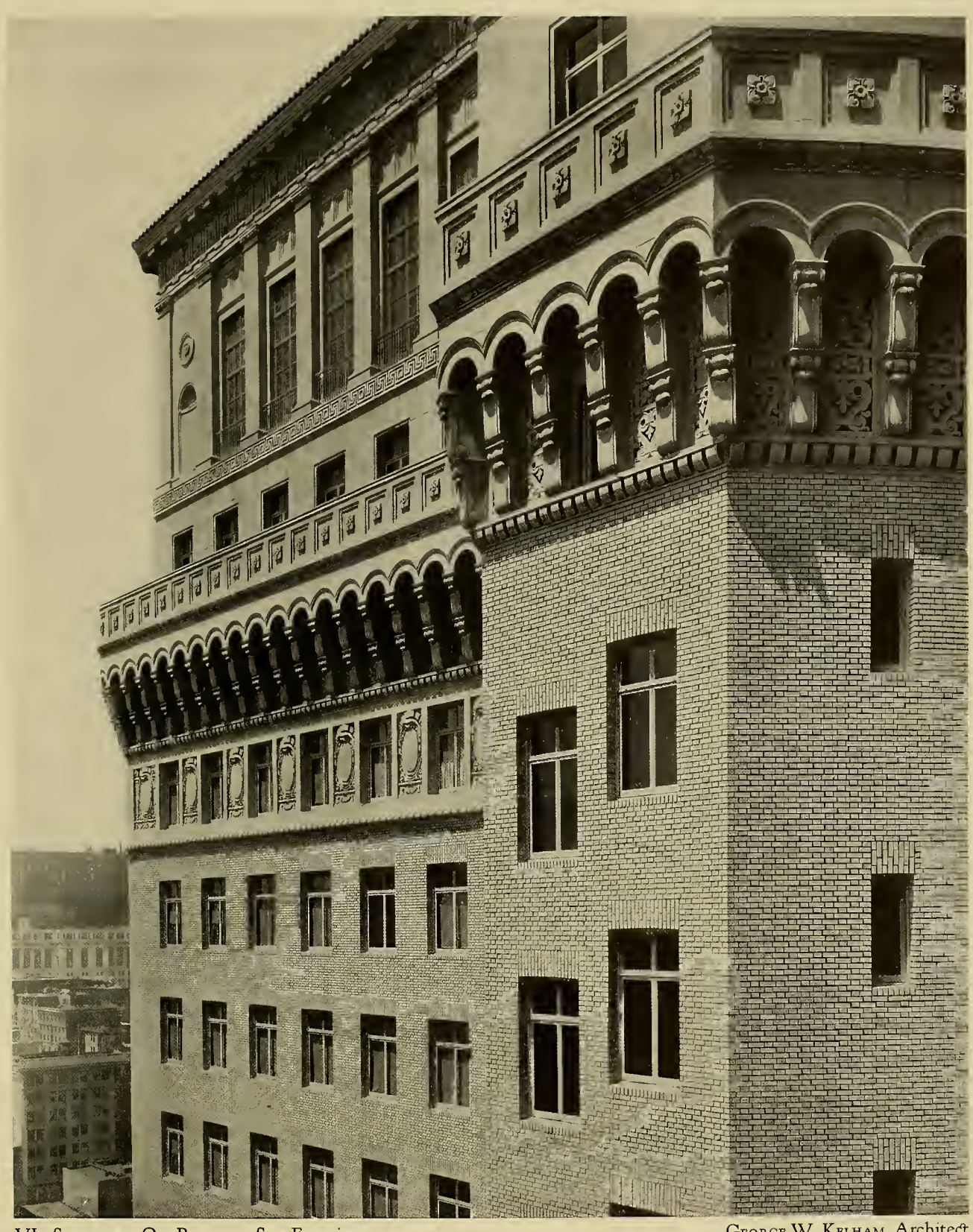
Except for the main entranceway, the first three stories, finished in granite, have but little applied ornament. This granite base, therefore, complements and accentuates the stories resting on it, wherein full advantage has been taken of the plastic possibilities of terra-cotta.

IV · Standard Oil Building, San Francisco — George W. Kelham, Architect

Here Granitex terra-cotta and Granitex brick are brought together in perfect unison. The imposing stair bay, the opulent intermediate cornice, and the columnar treatment of the stories immediately below the gently pitching roof of Cordova tile, combine to make this court elevation a joy forever.

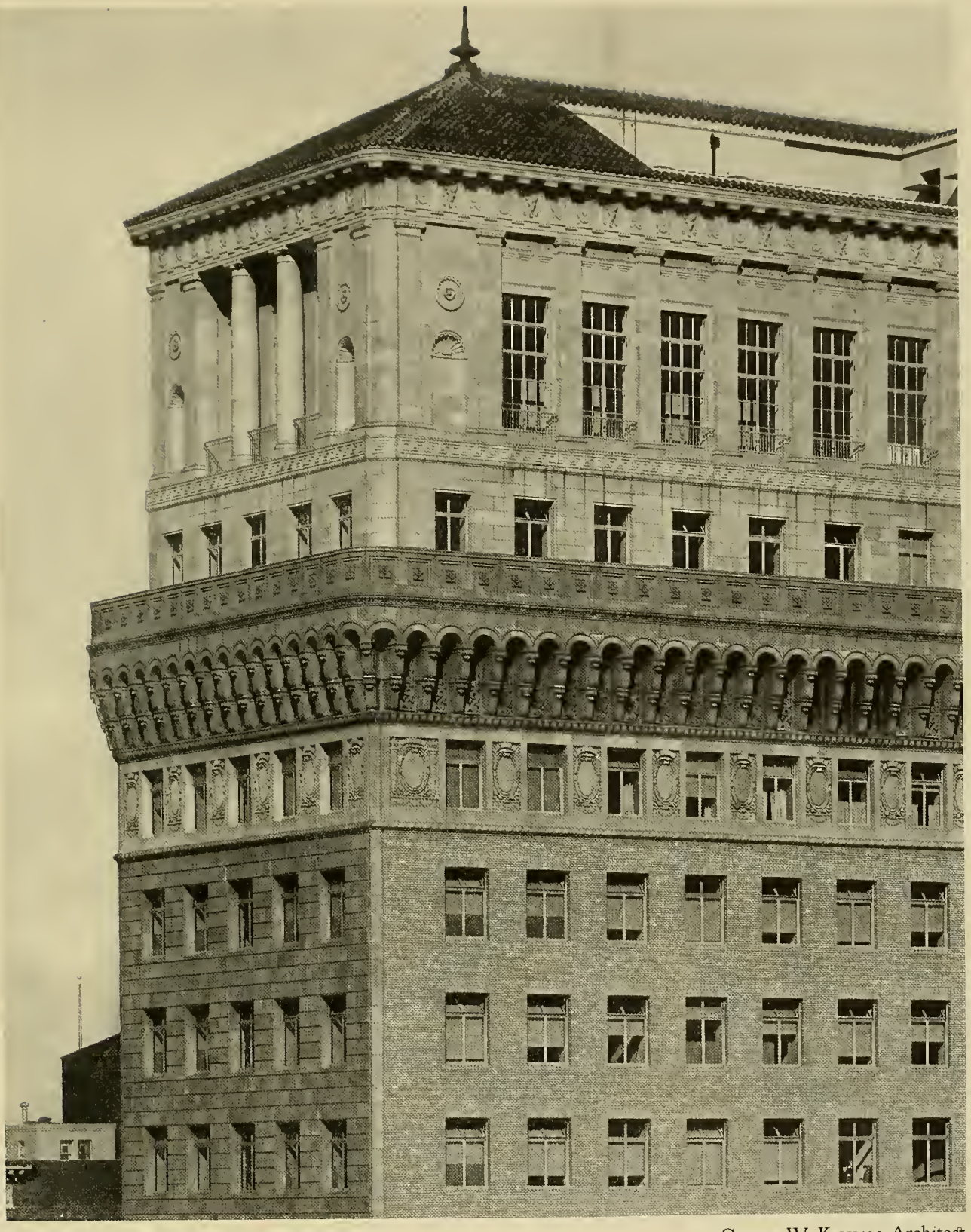
V · Standard Oil Building, San Francisco — George W. Kelham, Architect

This sky-scraping loggia under the pitched roof is dedicated to the recreational uses of employees. It illustrates a treatment of the roofs of office buildings that is becoming more and more popular in California, where such facilities can be used all the year round.



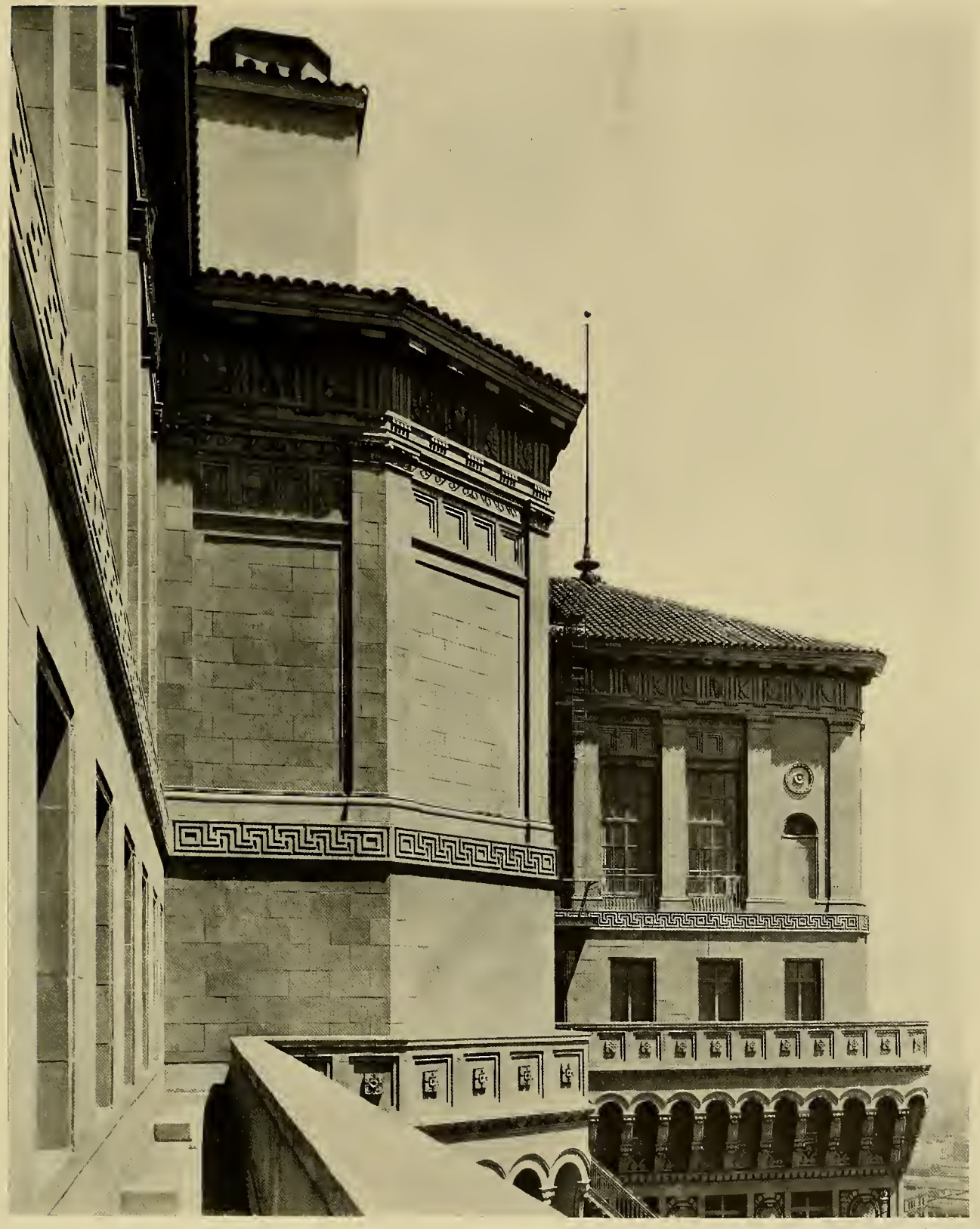
VI · Standard Oil Building, San Francisco — George W. Kelham, Architect

The plasticity of terra-cotta, a favorite material of the Italian Renaissance, is admirably illustrated in the decorative treatment of the intermediate cornice. To light the storeroom, many of the terra-cotta panels between the brackets are perforated, with windows behind.



VII · Standard Oil Building, San Francisco — George W. Kelham, Architect

All these details of ornament—bracket and panel, cartouche, capital and rosette—were reproduced in quantity from the original set of moulds. The soft rose overtone of the Cordova roof tile co-operates with this rich decoration to give the building warmth and color.



VIII · Standard Oil Building, San Francisco — George W. Kelham, Architect

By setting the upper stories back from the street line, the monumental character of the structure was enforced, and the architect seized the opportunity to evoke the feeling of a castellated Florentine palace.

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